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ROLF HOCHHUTH'S *DER STELLVERTRETER* AND THE CULTURE OF DEATH

In his convocation address to the Freshman Year Seminar at UMM in September 2001, Zev Kedem from Israel (an Auschwitz survivor from Schindler's List) referred to the holocaust during the time of National Socialism as "the culture of death." As a child in Poland, he experienced Ghetto life in the Jewish Quarter in Krakow and the suspension of civil rights for the Jews. He spoke of the deportations out of the Ghetto and resettlement in concentration camps, mass executions, and the industrialization of the killing process with trolleys, gas chambers, and ovens for the purpose of destroying the Jewish minority. The Nazis had control over life and death of their victims, depersonalizing and dehumanizing them, and finally killing them, at first with bullets, then with carbon monoxide, and finally with Zyklon B, the "Endlösung" or "final solution" agreed upon at the Wannsee Conference in 1942. A culture of death such as this, in Zev Kedem's view, operates by destroying freedom and life, establishing a totalitarian government and silencing the opposition, imposing its own views on minorities. He discussed the following questions: 1) How does one respond to such a culture of death? 2) What strategies are available? 3) Have we come to terms with the culture of death or does it continue to grow (in Kosovo, Croatia, and with the recent attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington? 4) Are we dehumanizing people in other parts of the world? 5) How does the process of dehumanization work through technology and mega-corporations?

Hochhuth's play *Der Stellvertreter* (*The Deputy*) similarly raises moral issues and questions, specifically about the responsibility of individuals as part of greater entities (such as the medical profession, the defense apparatus, and the Church). It is a very dark and controversial play from the 1960's, dealing with "the culture of death" by using representations of figures from the holocaust of WWII in Europe and Central Europe as characters, and it has sparked a great deal of debate, which continues to this day. Hochhuth confronts his audience through his interpretation of documentary evidence, resulting in much soul-searching for those involved. His play has led to an investigation by the Catholic Church about the veracity of the accusations the drama articulates, specifically the stance of Pope Pius XII and the Nuncio for the Vatican, Orsenigo, toward the Concordat with Hitler and the Church's alleged silence in view of the deportations and mass annihilations of Jews and Catholic priests who spoke out against Hitler's atrocities.

The cast of characters includes Adolf Eichmann, Professor August Hirt, and Josef Mengele (though he remains unnamed, simply called the Doctor). Their outward appearance while they entertain themselves bowling in the *Jägerkeller* in Falkensee outside of Berlin is deceptive: Eichmann, whom the stage instructions characterize as an "amiable bureaucrat, who did his job with so little of the sinister glamor of a Grand Inquisitor that in 1945, no one even bothered to search for him" (29) is revealed by documentary evidence "to be the most diligent shipping agent who ever labored in the employ of Death" (29). He liked to study railroad schedules, most appropriate for the head of the Department of Jewish Affairs in the Gestapo from 1941 to 1945 and chief of operations in the deportation of three million Jews to extermination camps. In 1935, while working in the Jewish section of the SD as a member of the SS, he was investigating possible solutions to "the Jewish question" and even sent to Palestine to

discuss with Arab leaders “the viability of large scale immigration to the Middle East” (USHMM). In 1938, Eichmann set up the *Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung* (Center for Jewish Emigration), which resulted in the establishment of similar offices in Prague and Berlin. It was Eichmann who organized the Wannsee Conference in January 1942 in regard to the “final solution of the Jewish question” (USHMM). At the end of the war, Eichmann escaped from an American internment camp and fled to Argentina, where he lived under an assumed name until Israeli Mossad agents found him in 1960 and abducted him to Jerusalem to stand trial. He was sentenced to death and executed in 1962.

Professor Hirt is the “life of the party” in the second scene of Act I. He is an “anatomist and collector of skulls at the University of Strasbourg” (30). According to Hochhuth, “the idiocy and cruelty he pursued in the guise of science went beyond the limits common to the practice of many SS doctors” (30). At the time the play was written, Hochhuth believed that Hirt was probably practicing medicine under an assumed name. Recent documentation about SS Captain Dr. August Hirt indicates that he was captured in Strasbourg by French troops and killed himself shortly after that. The fictional Hirt justifies his preoccupation with collecting skulls for his anatomical research as necessary for posterity: “in days to come our grandchildren/ should know why the final solution of the Jewish question was absolutely necessary and in the nature of things/ from the *scientific* point of view as well as others” (53).

Dr. Josef Mengele appears in the third scene of the first act bearing the brains of Jewish twins in formaldehyde instead of bringing flowers when visiting Gerstein, an SS officer and engineer responsible for storing and delivering chemicals for the final solution. In the preceding bowling scene, the Doctor is described as “cool and cheery” (31), a dandy with a cane, which he used to make his selections in Auschwitz when a train or truck filled with people arrived, indicating whether they must go to the right or to the left, to live or to die. Hochhuth compares him to a puppet player pulling invisible strings. He is the embodiment of evil. Outwardly, though, he is extremely charming, belying his arrogance. It is a matter of record that he promised children pudding or sweets in the most pleasant way before sending them to the gas chambers. On the railroad platform, he solicitously asked new arrivals if they felt ill, and when they admitted they did, touched by so much “persuasive kindness” (32), they were the first to be killed. Prisoners in Auschwitz called Mengele “a devil who took pleasure in his work” (32). At the time the play was written, Dr. Josef Mengele had not been found. He fled Auschwitz on January 18, 1945, when the Soviet Army arrived. In June of that year, he was captured by the Americans but not identified as a war criminal. He escaped and made his way to Argentina, living in hiding there, in Paraguay and in Brazil, until January 24, 1979. He drowned while swimming in the ocean in Bertioiga, Brazil. Mengele is notorious for his research on twins in Auschwitz: they escaped immediate death but became the subject of horrendous experiments which they often did not survive. He was obsessed with the nature vs. nurture controversy and wanted to demonstrate that heredity was more important than environment. He is perhaps best known as the “Angel of Death.” (To be continued....)

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In *The Deputy*, his first play, published in 1963, Rolf Hochhuth accuses Pope Pius XII of neglecting his duties as Christ's representative on earth by remaining silent in spite of his awareness of the atrocities committed in the concentration camps and practicing *Realpolitik*, like his Nuncio, Orsenigo, even when baptized Jews were being arrested and deported in plain view of the Vatican. The Catholic Church was inextricably linked with the German *Reich* through the Concordat of 1933, which legitimized Hitler in return for freedom of worship for Catholics under National Socialism. As the war progressed, the Pope could or would not abrogate the Concordat, in spite of confirmed reports of mass killings in Poland, Holland, France, Hungary, and the Ukraine. Not only Jews were victimized, but also priests and political opponents. By 1942, monasteries and convents no longer were able to provide sanctuary, as in the case of Edith Stein, who was a convert to Catholicism and a nun, captured by the Gestapo and killed in Auschwitz. Count Fontana, the Pope's legal and financial councillor, suggests in the second act that Hitler is fighting the battle against Stalin and Bolshevism, and the Cardinal (his scarlet robes symbolic of bloodshed in defense of the Christian faith) supports that idea, remarking that perhaps God is using Hitler as an instrument to humble the nations of Europe, so that they may never again redraw their borders as they once were. In his view, a victory by Stalin would perpetuate totalitarianism in Europe. For this reason, Hitler had to defeat Stalin and, in turn, be defeated by Britain and the USA, thus saving the Christian Occident from the Red Army and preparing the way for a United Europe as successor to the Holy Roman Empire. The Pope himself considers the German occupation of Rome in 1943 protection against anarchy. He is concerned about the bombing of Italian factories and consequent unemployment, which would incite workers to riot and perhaps motivate them to embrace communism. Among his main preoccupations, however, are the financial vicissitudes of the Vatican and the profit of its stocks in the sale of shares in the Hungarian Railroad if the Russians occupied Hungary (214). Unlike the Cardinal, the Pope in Hochhuth's play opposes the idea of a United Europe. He wants to mediate a peace which would establish Germany as a buffer zone between East and West, a country which would hold the balance of power in Europe: "The balance of the Continent is more important/ than its unity which hardly corresponds/ to Europe's ancient national traditions" (210). At the end of Act IV, he dictates to his scribe a document expressing sympathy with the victims of the war without expressly mentioning the atrocities committed against the Jews, in order to maintain the spirit of neutrality promised by the Concordat, yet claiming: "No one shall say/ We sacrificed the law of Christian love/ to political calculations – no! Today,/ as always, Our spirit dwells upon the unfortunates" (212).

When Hochhuth's play was first produced in West Berlin in 1963 by Erwin Piscator, Cardinal Montini (that same year to become Pope Paul VI as successor to Pope John Paul XXIII) responded for the Vatican in an open letter, and subsequent performances in Basel and New York were given with police protection to guard against riots in the streets (Demetz). By dramatizing a taboo subject — the hierarchy of guilt from the upper echelons down to the majority of Germans who brought Hitler to power legally and supported him actively or passively — Hochhuth irritated healing wounds. But his dictum was: "Authors must articulate the bad conscience of their nation because the politicians have such a good one" (Mandel). He implicated the whole civilized world by association, especially England and America, for not stopping the exterminations, equating inaction

with complicity.

The international uproar in connection with various productions of Hochhuth's *The Deputy* gave renewed impetus to the documentary theater of the sixties. Erwin Piscator, who directed the première of the play, came from the tradition of political theater, which was didactic like the Jesuit theater of the 17th century and aimed at changing the attitudes of audiences. During the 19th century in Germany, the theater became a place of political education rather than entertainment or amusement. The slogan for political theater was "knowledge, perception, commitment" (Mandel): *Kenntnis, Erkenntnis, Bekenntnis*. This applies to Hochhuth's theater as well: it probes moral issues and crises of conscience. The 1998 German edition of *Der Stellvertreter* is dedicated to Pater Maximilian Kolbe, Prisoner Nr. 16670 in Auschwitz and the Prelate Bernhard Lichtenberg, Provost (*Dompropst*) of St. Hedwig's Cathedral in Berlin, both martyrs for their cause in opposition to the established Church. The subtitle of the play is "A Christian Tragedy." The 1964 translation (with a foreword by Dr. Albert Schweitzer) contains a quote from Albert Camus: "Who are we, anyway, that we dare criticize the highest spiritual authority of the century? Nothing, in fact, but the simple defenders of the spirit, who yet have a right to expect the most from those whose mission it is to represent the spirit." The representatives of the Vatican in the play (the Pope as the spiritual deputy, the Cardinal as his political advisor, and Count Fontana as legal and financial Counsel) are opposed by Riccardo Fontana, the Jesuit priest, who implores the Pope to break the Concordat with Hitler and to speak out publicly against the murders of Jews and priests in concentration camps all over Europe. When the Pope refuses to act by addressing Hitler directly, Riccardo pins the Jewish star on his cassock and goes to his death by joining a Jewish transport to Auschwitz. While Riccardo opposes the Establishment in the Vatican, Kurt Gerstein infiltrates the German military apparatus as SS Obersturmführer and engineer in charge of storing and delivering chemicals for the "final solution," subverting as much as his position permits the actual use of the deadly materials. He also hides a Jew, Jacobson, in his apartment in Berlin and helps him to escape to England disguised as a priest in Riccardo's habit, carrying Riccardo Fontana's diplomatic passport. As Siegfried Mandel points out in *The Reflected Intellect*, "oppositional attitudes receive a considered hearing in the play through the confrontations which help to create dramatic tensions and give documentary evidence a tangible shape."

Hochhuth has never shied away from controversial topics, and his documentary theater often has a final act in real life. *The Deputy* has jeopardized the beatification process of Pope Pius XII. The canonization proceedings are presently stalled while a commission investigates the charges leveled against his conduct during World War II. The International Catholic-Jewish Historical Commission (ICJHC) was appointed in 1999, following the publication of John Cornwell's controversial bestseller, *Hitler's Pope*. This commission of historical scholars finished its review of the Vatican archives in October of 2000 and submitted a preliminary report but was refused access to non-published documents beyond 1923. The Commission had to suspend its study in July of 2001 without issuing a final report.

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Teaching Hochhuth's *Der Stellvertreter* has not been without challenges. The material is difficult for American students to understand on many levels: the play is rather abstract, dealing with ideas, history, and geography foreign to students of college age. The dramatic form requires a great deal of focus and concentration in reading. The complexity of the language was compounded at times by dialectal speech of the characters, particularly in the second scene of Act I, where Hochhuth also employs irony and cynicism in the portrayal of his characters. This necessitated additional readings to establish the historical and biographical context for the fictional representations when the play was already daunting by its sheer volume (roughly 400 pages). Aside from having students write scene summaries to engage them in class discussion, I led them through great portions of the text and asked them to concentrate on Acts II and IV, which were shorter. In pairs of two, they identified with a pair of antagonists in the drama: for example, Fontana Sr. and Riccardo, his son (the Jesuit priest), or the Cardinal and Riccardo. They then rewrote their lines from the play in simpler German and presented those scenes to the other class participants. I had the students write journal entries interpreting the headings for various acts and scenes, making them aware of important themes as well as tone and mood.

To illustrate Hochhuth's view of the interchangeability of characters indicated below the listing of *personae* in the play, I showed 10 to 15 minutes of a video about Pater Maximilian Kolbe, who voluntarily died in Auschwitz for another prisoner. In this video, one and the same actor plays the narrator, the priest, the arresting Gestapo officer, the Devil, and the Nazi officer in Auschwitz who tortures and kills the priest. Then I asked the students to discuss Hochhuth's text: "The characters grouped...by twos, threes, or fours should be played by the same actor – for recent history has taught us that in the age of universal military conscription, it is not necessarily to anyone's credit or blame, or even a question of character, which uniform one wears or whether one stands on the side of the victims or the executioners." We talked about duty, accident of birth, and questions of morality and moral action, regular and secular laws, questions of conscience and humanity.

For their midterm, I had the students watch the film "The Scarlet and the Black," which was in itself a lesson in history. I explained the background for the film and asked them to write a coherent essay connecting what they had learned from their reading of Hochhuth's play to their conscious viewing experience. The essays I received were interesting and original with students taking a definite stance toward the material and writing from their own perspective. I was able to determine what they had known about the holocaust before their reading of Hochhuth, what they had learned from the play, how much their own experience had contributed to an understanding of the text, and what their moral choices (theoretically) would be.

Testing the Unit on Hochhuth:

Like many of Hochhuth's characters in *Der Stellvertreter* (*The Deputy*), the two antagonists in the film "The Scarlet and the Black" are historical figures. Herbert Kappler (1907-1978) was head of the Gestapo in Rome from 1944. Starting in 1943, he was responsible for the deportation of about ten thousand Jews to concentration camps. Monsignor O'Flaherty (1898-1963) was ordained in Rome in 1925 and held doctorates in divinity, canon law, and philosophy. He served the Vatican as a diplomat in Egypt, Haiti, San Domingo, and Czechoslovakia. Back in Rome, he started hiding and smuggling

refugees in the fall of 1942, when the safety of prominent Jews and aristocratic anti-Fascists was endangered. He hid them in monasteries and convents, and in his own residence—the German college. In the spring of 1943, British Prisoners of War were included in his operation, supported by Sir Francis D’Arcy Godolphin Osborne, British Minister to the Vatican. With his help, he saved an estimated 4,000 Allied Prisoners of War and Jews from the Germans in Rome during 1943-1944 (Michael O’Regan, The Irish Times: August 1, 2000).

On September 10, 1943, the Germans began to occupy Rome. On September 26, Kappler started to extract gold from Rome’s Jewish community. On October 6, Kappler received an order to seize 8,000 Jews in Rome for the purpose of liquidating them. A German diplomat suggested using these Jews to work on Italian fortifications instead (Breitman and Naftali, Records of the Office of Strategic Services [Record Group 226]). On October 18, 1,007 Jews were sent to Auschwitz; only 10 returned alive (The Simon Wiesenthal Center, 1997).

Such is the historical background for the film, “The Scarlet and the Black,” which is based on a novel by J. P. Gallagher, The Scarlet Pimpernel. Answer the following questions in all parts in a well organized, coherent essay in German or English, according to your preference. Support your ideas with examples from the film and the text. Give page numbers only (xx) for reference to *Der Stellvertreter*.

1. How is the film “The Scarlet and the Black” relevant to the drama by Hochhuth? What episodes or ideas connect the two?
2. How do both the film and the play represent Pope Pius XII?
3. In what ways did your reading of the play and the historical materials contribute to your understanding of the film?
4. How much did you know about the holocaust in Italy and other European countries previous to reading Hochhuth?
5. Drama deals with conflict. How are the tensions in the play achieved? In the film?
6. Are you an idealist or a realist, according to the Cardinal’s definition in the play? Whose ideas and goals would you support in the play? In the film? Why? How would you have put those ideas into practice had you lived during this period in history?
7. Did you like the film? Why or why not? Elaborate!

In answering question 4, one student wrote about her personal experience visiting Auschwitz: “In some of the old barracks, there are windows full of hair and personal belongings, such as glasses and suitcases which had been collected from the deportees.... It opened my eyes as to what really went on during the holocaust..” While students had learned about National Socialism in Germany, they knew little about the German occupation of Italy and the deportation of Italian Jews. One student concluded that after reading Hochhuth’s play and seeing the film, she realized that the holocaust was bigger than Germany, that there were more countries involved in the deportations and liquidations, and that not only Jews were discriminated against, but many other people and cultures, as well. For another student, knowledge about the Concordat was central to an understanding of both the play and the film. She had attended a Catholic high school, but did not learn about WWII in Italy, or about the Vatican, “let alone what went on inside the Vatican’s walls during the Holocaust..” She concluded that after studying the historical background for the play and the film, she had gained new perspectives on

WWII: “The materials covered allowed me to think more critically about what happened during the Holocaust and I began to see the different perspectives many people hold. Some, like Hochhuth, believe the Pope is as guilty as Hitler himself, while others feel that he did what he could, and there wasn’t more he could have done. Because of the information these works have brought to light, many people, including myself, are beginning to understand the Vatican’s role in the Holocaust and will continue to question what really happened during the Second World War.”

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The Scarlet and the Black (USA 1983, 1998)

